George Hilbery Warne and the Warnes Hotel

George Hilbery Warne was born at 3 Coldbath Street, Greenwich on 24 February 1864. His birth certificate records his middle name as Ilbery, a spelling also used by his father Joseph, an upholsterer originally from Reading, but George seems to have preferred the forms Hilbery, or Hilbury. Spelling was a much less precise art in those days.

Joseph had married Maria Randall in Lewisham, Kent in 1860, and George was their second child. Their daughter Charlotte was born early in 1863. Joseph's father Henry was a journeyman brushmaker, originally from Southampton.

George and Charlotte grew up with their mother Maria in her mother's home in Lewisham. There is no further record of Joseph, and he most likely died in 1865. Money must have been very tight and Maria was working as a charwoman.

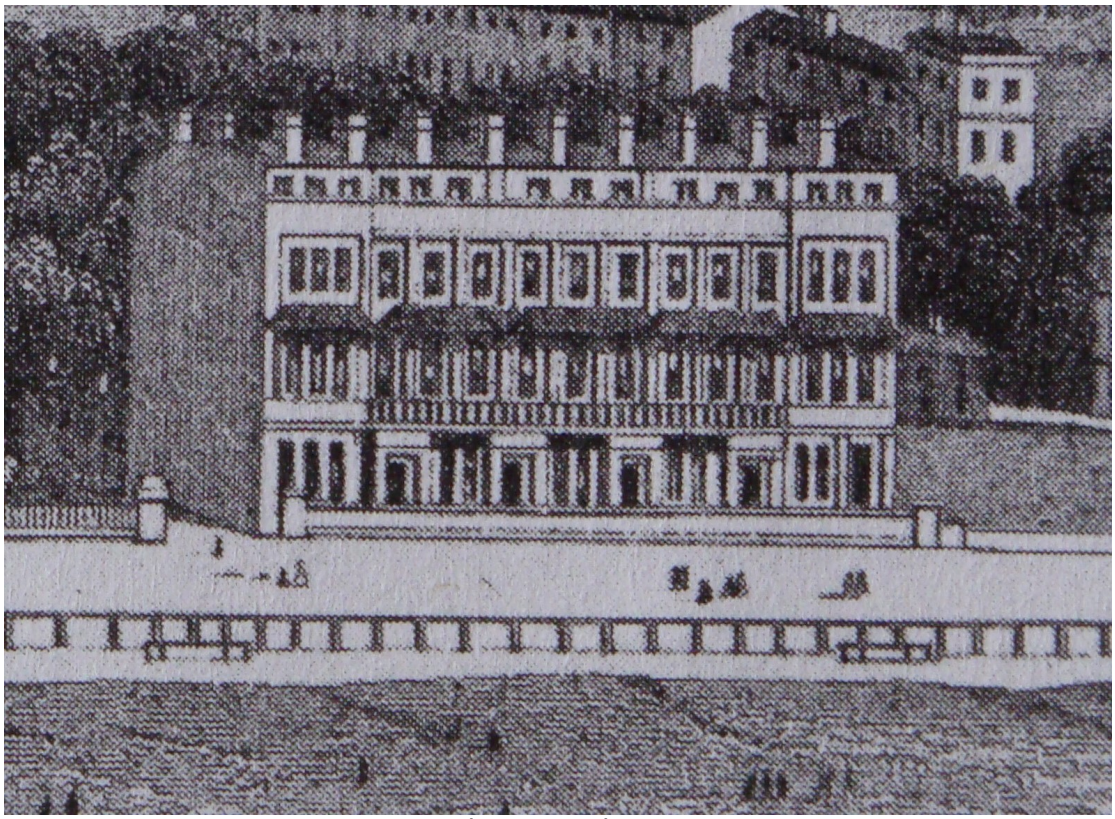
By 1881, both children were at work as servants. Charlotte was a lady's maid in Plaistow, East London and George, aged 17, had moved to Brighton, where he was working as a footman to the master of a boarding school in Montpelier Crescent.

George married Mary Elizabeth Stevens, from Lewes, on 17th October 1887 at St Peters, Brighton and their first child Frederick Hilbury Warne was born on 27th January 1888.

George and Mary ran a lodging house at 38 Regency Square, Brighton. In 1891 they had seven lodgers, including a stockbroker from Ireland and his family and

three young unmarried women. Frederick was then living with his grandparents George and Lois Stevens in Lewes.

By 1899 George and Maria had moved to Worthing where they converted No 1, the easternmost house in York Terrace on Marine Parade, into Warnes Hotel.



York Terrace in 1850

York Terrace had been built in 1822 on Low Field, east of The Steyne, and consisted of five large houses, often used as lodging houses and small boarding schools as well as prestigious private residences. Its stucco façade, ionic pilasters, porches and balconies created one of Worthing's most impressive Regency frontages.

The hotel has often been described as having been opened in 1889, but this could not have been so because, in 1891, 1 York Terrace was a boarding school for boys run by Leonard Myddleton-Wallich.

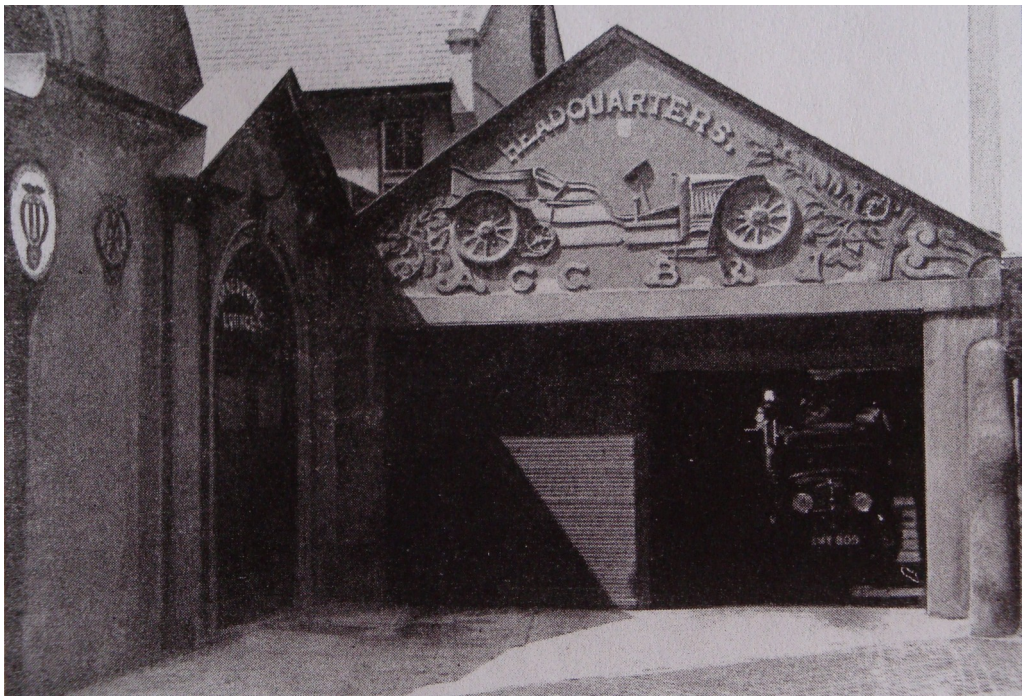
York Terrace in 1892

In 1899 George's second son Percy Edward Warne was born, but a year later his elder son Frederick sadly died at the age of 12.

The hotel was clearly prospering as by 1901 George was running it with the help of his wife Maria, his unmarried sister Charlotte and a living-in staff of eight, including three waiters. It expanded to include the other four houses in the terrace, and by February 1907 had been converted into Worthing's largest hotel, one of the most modern and luxurious hotels in the country.

George was by then a keen automobilist and in about 1899 joined the then recently formed Automobile Club of Great Britain. From the start he ran the hotel with the motorcar in mind, promoting it as "The Motorists' Mecca". In 1899 he established the first hotel garage, or engine house, in England. Situated behind the hotel, it was large and had entrances in both York Road and The Steyne, providing accommodation for professional engineers and facilities for the repairs that were frequently required by early motorcars.

As a result, the hotel quickly became a popular destination for early motoring expeditions. The garage survived until 1947.



The garage at Warnes in York Road. It was the headquarters of the Automobile Club of Great Britain and Ireland, whose initials, ACGB&I, can be seen over the door

In 1902, George organised a trial from Crystal Palace to Worthing, using his hotel as the lunch halt before the competitors began their return journey to London via Arundel. The event attracted over 250 competitors in 62 cars.

Although George and others were doing their best to encourage motorists to visit Worthing the authorities thought otherwise. A number of the competitors were fined £5 or £10 for furious driving, which at the time meant 18-20 miles per hour. Council members announced their intention of applying a speed limit of 10 mph on some roads, but were persuaded by George to try the effect of warning notices, erected at his own expense, at the entrances to the town.

Further motoring events were held at the hotel in 1903 and 1905, the latter attracting over 300 cars and motorcycles on Easter Monday.

The 1905 motoring event at Warnes Hotel

In 1905, the Automobile Club, which had its headquarters at Warnes Hotel, became the Royal Automobile Club.

George Hilbery Warne at the wheel, with John Philip Sousa in 1905

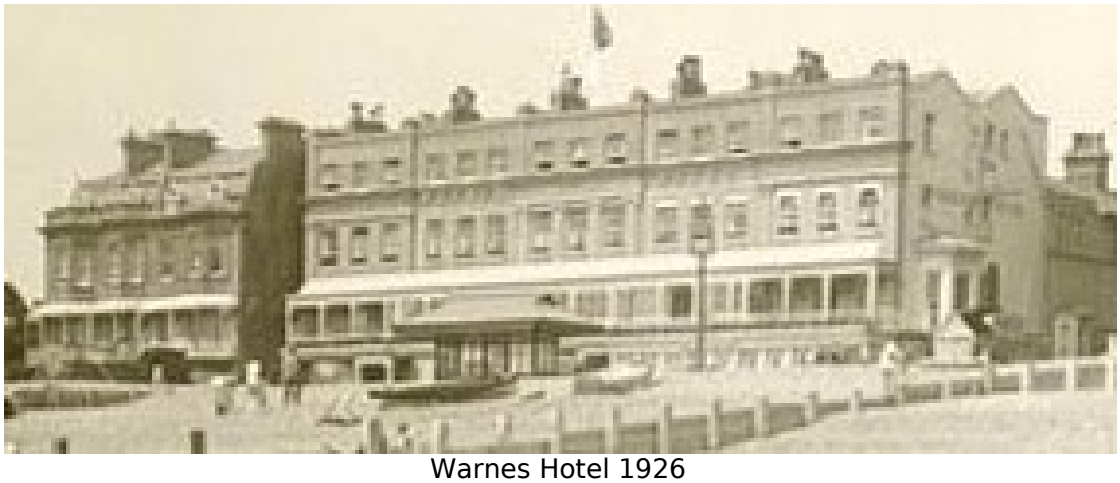
Under George's watchful eye the hotel went from strength to strength, and Christmas at the Warnes was a recognised feature of the winter season. The hotel was always fully booked and elaborate entertainments were laid on for the holiday. Famous singers and other musicians performed and dancing was a regular feature. In 1909 there was a troupe of human marionettes and an

electric rifle range. By this time George had become a Town Councillor.

George Hilbery Warne died at Steyning in 1916 and is buried in Broadwater Cemetery with his son Frederick Hilbery Warne.

Soldiers at the side entrance of Warnes Hotel, facing the Steyne, during the First World War

By this time the hotel was becoming well-known nationally, and during the first half of the 20th century almost every VIP who visited Worthing stayed or dined at the prestigious seafront Warnes Hotel. They included Winston Churchill, Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia and his family, Field Marshal Montgomery, General (later President) Eisenhower, King Edward VII, King George V, John Philip Sousa, the famous American bandmaster and composer of The Stars and Stripes, and many film stars.



Warnes Hotel 1926

After the formal opening of the new Pier Pavilion in June 1926, a hundred VIPs were treated to lunch at the Warnes Hotel. The menu included turtle soup, salmon, roast chicken and bacon.

In the early 1930s the commissionaire at the hotel was former army sergeant, William Kenny, VC. In 1933, when Prince George stayed at the Warnes, he stopped and had a long chat with Kenny, delaying the booking-in of his tired entourage for several minutes. Sergeant Kenny's Victoria Cross was awarded "for conspicuous bravery" in the first year of World War One. According to his citation he rescued wounded men on five occasions under very heavy fire, in the most fearless manner, having twice previously saved machine guns by carrying them out of action. On numerous occasions Drummer Kenny conveyed urgent messages under very dangerous circumstances over fire-swept ground.

The annual dinner of the Worthing Hockey Club at Warnes Hotel, c1934

After being forced out of Abyssinia by the Italian invasion in 1936, the Emperor Haile Salassie stayed with his family at the Warnes Hotel for six weeks before moving to Fairfield House in Bath, where he spent the remainder of his exile. He returned to Ethiopia in 1941, was deposed in a military coup in 1974 and died shortly after on August 26, 1975, aged 83. On his death the flags on the hotel were flown at half-mast.

During his stay in Warnes Hotel the Emperor was seen standing on the balcony of his luxury apartments, gazing forlornly out over the English Channel. Selassie said he enjoyed his stay in Worthing, and the peace and quiet the town offered.

The hotel closed to residential guests in June 1940 as a result of the war, but the Old England Bar in the Steyne, inaugurated in 1930, remained open for the duration.

Winston Churchill visited Worthing on a number of occasions during the war to inspect coastal defences and to plan for D-Day with Allied commanders, including General Montgomery, at the Warnes Hotel.

Troops were billeted at the Warnes throughout the war. A member of a small party of Royal Artillery reported - “On Field Service rations we fed very well and the hotel bar in the basement entrance functioned normally. We assembled a useful cricket team to play the local clubs in Worthing. One soldier shot at a seagull on the seawall from the first floor and one of the local fishermen came up some steps rubbing his rump and blaspheming. Naturally no one could throw any light on what had happened but he did feel better after a couple of pints. We also witnessed a V1 *(a flying bomb)* being shot down by a fighter plane a quarter of a mile or so offshore. Perhaps a dozen or twenty windows in the hotel and next door terrace of homes were blown in.”

Later in the war, Russian soldiers were billeted at the hotel. They had been caught by the Allies wearing German uniforms after D-Day, having changed sides in the war to escape the German Prisoner-of-War camps.

SUN and FUN
SUNSHINE is Worthing's forte, and Warnes Hotel is in Worthing. Modern in every particular. New bathrooms with endless water-supply, hot and cold, softened by new plant. New suites with baths, big bed-sitting rooms, all saturated with sunshine and seashine and fresh air.
Perfect cooking, perfect comfort. All sports and a motoring paradise.
WARNES
HOTEL
WORTHING
Write for Booklet

18
"and now back to dinner"
—after a round on a glorious sunny links with brisk sea air to lower your handicap, it's good to look forward to a shower in hot, foamy luxury—then dinner—the very thought lightens our brogues!
Afterwards?—dancing?—a few cheery drinks?—or maybe a quiet read in the lounge?—Whatever we do, it will be in good company and ideal surroundings.
Warnes means the end of a perfect day—and the making of many more, to come.
Warnes of Worthing
Tel. WORTHING 2222

Advertisements for Warnes Hotel, 1925 and 1949

The refurbishment of the hotel after the war saw the demolition of the old garage entrance in York Road. The

hotel reopening in March 1947 was marked with a banquet for over 200 guests.

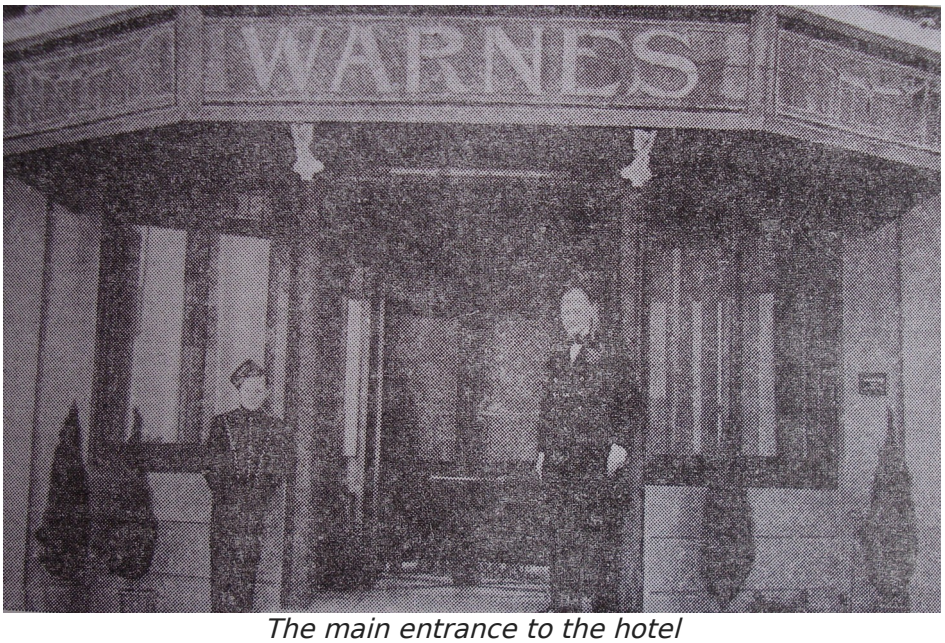
The hotel continued to be a regular venue for formal dinners, conferences and training courses. In 1963, Lloyds Bank held so many security training courses there that the course presenter was in permanent residence.

The art deco entrance to Warnes restaurant

The hotel was refurbished again between 1971 and 1973, including for the first time the provision of private bathrooms for all the rooms in the main block. After the refurbishment its new banqueting room could accommodate 400 people for a dinner dance and 600 for a conference.

The British Allergy Society held their annual meeting there in 1971 and in 1981 the hotel was the venue for the annual dinner of the Southdown Sheep Society.

The interior of the banqueting hall



The main entrance to the hotel

Everything about the Warnes Hotel had a cachet that was difficult for competing local hoteliers to rival.

Under the surface, however, the hotel was finding it increasingly difficult to trade profitably. It had been through the hands of six different owners since the war,

and their various attempts to reposition the hotel in its market had not been entirely successful.

In 1984 the then owners, Grand Metropolitan Hotels, decided to close the doors for the last time and to convert the building into luxury apartments with an indoor swimming pool.

Warnes Hotel shortly before its closure

Planning permission was obtained and the hotel finally closed in 1985. Work began immediately, ripping out the wood panelling, ornate stained glass windows and intricate moulded ceilings that had characterised the old hotel.

However, two years later, in October 1987, a massive fire gutted the empty building and damaged the hotel beyond repair. Over 100 firemen fought the blaze, and the police at the time were quoted as viewing the fire as “of doubtful origin”.

The fire in October 1987

A long planning battle then began over the future of the badly damaged façade. By 1992, plans were being proposed to retain the section of the building on the corner of Steyne Gardens, and to build a replica of the Marine Parade façade, with flats behind.
The façade was demolished by hand, and various valuable features, including an enamelled crest of Haile Selasse, were removed and stored for re-use.

The site was cleared and used as a car park for a number of years, while planners continued to discuss its future.

Eventually, Roffey Homes obtained planning permission to build a new block of 72 apartments on the site, in an art

deco style that reflected the character of the old building without being an exact replica.

Building commenced in 2003 and in 2007 the completed development won a Distinction in Building Award.

The Warnes Apartments in 2008, and commemorative plaques

Compiled from internet sources and Worthing Reference Library's Local Studies Collection.
Roger Davies, September 2008